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Jules Laforgue: Constructing the Text

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The article looks at the problems involved in understanding Laforgue's poetry and asks whether these difficulties are, as has been claimed, symptoms of a universe slipping towards chaos or whether the meaninglessness is more apparent than real. It argues that the building-blocks of Laforgue's poetic language are the letters of the alphabet which are combined and recycled like atoms. Thus, Laforgue is able to create new words such as 'violupté' by breaking up and re-using existing ones. Language is imbued with change – so that it can adapt itself to convey new meanings. Change, therefore, is not totally negative. It is a movement in time that does more than tear down: it permits the recycling, the making new of what has gone before so that something of value can be handed on. Laforgue's extensive use of the intertext is part of this for it represents a renewal of tradition. Laforgue, then, uses protean, shifting language to construct a poetic artefact that will communicate meaning and preserve it for the future.

Many readers may share James Hiddleston's bafflement when faced with Laforgue's writing:

> Calembours, jeux de mots, barbarismes, anacoluthes, non-sens, babil, intertextes saccagés, comment sortir de ce tournoiement chaotique de signifiants apparemment coupés pour toujours de leurs signifiés?[1]

Hiddleston here outlines the main difficulties confronting the reader who tries to establish the meaning of Laforgue's verse. But there is a problem with what Hiddleston proposes as the central principle underlying these semantic difficulties: what are 'signifiants apparemment coupés ... de leurs signifiés'? Surely a 'signifiant' presupposes a linkage to a 'signifié' or 'signifiés'? This point seems to be conceded by Hiddleston when he uses 'apparemment', which implies that the 'signifiants' are only apparently cut off from their 'signifiés' – as though in reality they are still safely attached.

This permits Hiddleston to argue that sense is still possible. For him, Laforgue's language is ultimately revelatory:

> Pourtant les mots sont là pour (comme on disait) révéler les obsessions: feuilles, vent, sang, dimanches, couchants, pianos, vendanges ..., et l'on ne saurait nier l'effect cathartique que produit la lecture. Le miracle, c'est que Laforgue ait réussi à faire de tant de fragments éphémères et du disparate de son expérience un univers unique, entièrement «sui generis», et qui compte parmi les plus émouvants et peut-être parmi les plus durables du dix-neuvième siècle.[2]

Laforgue's poetic world is a collage, made up of 'fragments éphémères.' Yet it is constructed in such a way as to be meaningful. It is 'émouvant' for it touches a nerve of understanding within us.

However, Hiddleston is dealing with two different types of meaning. In the first extract quoted above, he is concerned with the semantic content of language. It is this which is so difficult to pin down. In the second quotation, he is interested in the context to which language refers, Laforgue's obsessions, and in the context which it shapes, the 'univers unique.' The question that arises is how it is possible to have a meaningful text that tells the reader something about the world to which it refers when the words in the text are 'signifiants apparemment coupés pour toujours de leurs signifiés.'

There is a third type of meaning that needs to be considered: the significance of our lives, our feeling that it is for some purpose that we live in the universe. Laforgue is in constant search for such meaningfulness in the world:

> Manger, rire, changer – pourtant tout est mystère!
> Dans quel but venons-nous sur ce vieux monde et d'où?[3]

Throughout the early poems, his thinking is dominated by a world whose meaning is denied to mankind. It produces in him a variety of reactions including the numbing despair found in 'Spleen' (Pia I, p. 248). This poem creates an enclosed world in which Laforgue is trapped between 'Tout m'ennuie ajourd'hui' and 'je m'ennuie encor.' Physical displacement is no solution since there is in the streets nothing to excite his interest.

The second quatrain is particularly interesting:

> Je regarde sans voir fouillant mon vieux cerveau,
> Et machinalement sur la vitre ternie
> Je fais du bout du doigt de la calligraphie.
> Bah! sortons, je verrai peut-être du nouveau.

The word 'machinalement' is significant for it indicates that the mind is not fully engaged in what is being done. This is important for it is the mind that distinguishes us from the machine and allows us to make meaning. So, what Laforgue is writing is not the bearer of any intended meaning. It has no signified. In other words, this would be an example of what would happen

if 'signifiants' were really rather than apparently 'coupés de leurs signifiés.' What would be left would be, not a signifier on its own, but something different – what Laforgue calls 'calligraphie.' What we have is a simulacrum of language, a non-functioning model. There is substance – the marks on the window – without any meaningful content. Consequently, there is neither signifier nor signified.

Laforgue's 'calligraphie' is an object and no more. It has no spiritual, intellectual or emotional charge to convey. Hiddleston would find here no 'tournoiement' nor would he find it 'émouvant.' The letters on the window are meaningless and random in their order. In this respect they are to be distinguished from the fully functioning language of the poem which is the meaningful arrangement of letters into a text.[4]

Walter Ong argues that dealing with language in its written form affects our experience of it:

> Sound, as has earlier been explained, exists only when it is going out of existence. I cannot have all the word present at once: when I say 'existence,' by the time I get to the '-tence,' the 'exis-' is gone. The alphabet implies that matters are otherwise, that a word is a thing, not an event, that it is present all at once, and that it can be cut up into little pieces, which can even be written forwards and pronounced backwards: 'p-a-r-t' can be pronounced 'trap.' If you put the word 'part' on a sound tape and reverse the tape, you do not get 'trap,' but a completely different sound, neither 'part' nor 'trap.'[5]

Words, then, may be considered not just as signs composed of signifiers and signifieds but as being composed of letters, the irreducible building-blocks of written script just as atoms are the building blocks of the world. In other words, it is not only Laforgue's poetic world which is made up of 'fragments éphémères,' but words themselves – the fragments in this case being letters which can be brought together into various combinations which may or may not be signs belonging to a signifying system.

This may appear to be an empirical view of language but is in fact as analytical and abstract as the Saussurean division into signifiers and signifieds. In this case the division is into the letters of the alphabet, or as Ong would put it: language is 'cut up into little pieces.' Our alphabet, which is a variant of the one invented by the Greeks, does not attempt to depict objects as do pictograms. Nor does it try to transcribe actual sound units as do syllabaries. The latter, as their name suggests, treat the syllable as the smallest possible sound unit – a reasonable procedure since that is the least that we

can pronounce. The alphabet, on the other hand goes beyond the syllable, analysing the subsounds that compose it, as Eric Havelock explains:

> Whereas all syllabic systems, including the Semitic shorthand, aim to reproduce the actual spoken units on a one-for-one basis, the Greek produces an atomic system which breaks all units into at least two abstract components and possibly more.[6]

These abstract components which form the basis of our writing are consonants and vowels. It is the former which makes abstraction necessary and useful. A 'consonant' as its name suggests cannot be pronounced in isolation but must always be attached to a vowel. Consequently, a 'b' can be isolated as an abstract idea in writing but when enunciated there will always be a vowel attached to it. A pure 'b' can never be pronounced and, even when we seek to isolate it in speech, as when we spell aloud, the 'b' is always followed by the sound 'i,' thereby becoming a syllable. It is only in alphabetic writing that a 'b' can exist other than as part of a syllable. This ability to divide a sound unit into constituent elements allows the writer to use a limited number of symbols in a variety of permutations so that any sound unit can be conveyed. One result of this is that we also start to consider the spoken language as being capable of similar division. For example, the word 'part' may be thought of as being made up of the sounds 'p-a-r-t' – whereas Ong's example of the tape shows that this is not the case. We rarely think of the spoken language as a continuum but rather as an sequence of objects made of smaller basic sound-units or phonemes.

Such an atomistic view of language accords with Laforgue's vision of the structure of the world:

> Puisque le Temps dévore
> Des siècles de soleils, où serez-vous alors,
> Atomes qu'aujourd'hui j'ose appeler mon corps?
> Non, mon corps est à tout, et la nature entière
> N'est qu'un perpétuel échange de matière.
>
> ('Suis-je', Pia I pp. 214-215)

The world of which he is a part is, as he has put it earlier, an 'incessant va et vient/D'atomes éternels.' In short the same bits are shuffled around eternally, just as a basic stock of letters or phonemes is shuffled around to make new bits of language.

The whole world and even the very language used to describe it is made up of Hiddleston's 'fragments éphémères.' Such a view helps us understand

better how Laforgue's writing functions. Take the case of words like 'éternullité.' What sort of a signifier are we dealing with here? Does describing language atomistically, as a series of marks help? It does – provided we extend the sense of 'mark' to include that which strikes the ear as well as the eye.

Daniel Grojnowski explains Laforgue's neologisms as follows:

> Le plus souvent c'est en effet la sexualité qui met Laforgue en verve de néologie. Au moment où ils sont énoncés, les vocables se chargent d'un sens second. La contiguïté phonique produit un signifiant parasitaire qui démystifie le premier, à moins qu'il ne lui confère sa plénitude signifiante. Les mots font l'amour et s'engrossent les uns les autres:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | volupté | *devient* violupté |
> | nuptial | voluptial |
> | réciproque | sexciproque |
> | sensuelles | sangsuelles.[7] |

Grojnowski's description of words making love is a witty one but it is limited – a fact acknowledged by the expression 'le plus souvent.' Yet, Grojnowski points us in the right direction. Time becomes space and the 'moment où ils sont énoncés' becomes 'la contiguïte phonique.' Language becomes a spatial phenomenon and this spatialization, this turning of language into a thing, is a prerequisite for the neologisms. It permits us to perceive them as collages. These, furthermore, are not haphazard but are at the service of meaning. They modify it by stripping away romantic accretions – as in 'violupté,' made up of fragments of 'violence' and 'volupté' – a neologism which also brings out the element of cruelty in the voluptuous, thereby restoring to the word its 'plénitude signifiante.' Sometimes the collage is apparent to the ear, but in others, notably 'sangsuelles,' the effect is more perceptible in the written form. In both cases language is treated as thing – either an acoustic or visual object capable of being broken into fragments which can then be used to form new and interesting words.

Indeed, such an argument would be supported by the following claim by Grojnowski:

> Plus de trente fois répété, le mot LUNE incante par anagramme l'entité NULE, de même que RIEN recèle et dissémine NIER.[8]

In the first example there is a collage of the written and spoken forms with the inclusion of the 'e,' silent in both cases and so perceptible only to the eye, and the use of a single 'l' instead of the double 'l' the eye expects, the

justification being that there is no difference in sound. In the second case, the anagram is visual: it is not the sounds of 'rien' that are rearranged but its letters. This is a slightly more complex version of the expressive possibilities hinted at by Ong's example of 't-r-a-p' and 'p-a-r-t.'

The process can be carried a stage further, as Grojnowski argues:

> Le jeu des mots transforme les virtualités de la compétence en performance de fait. Si l'«Eternullité» comprend également l'«Ether-nullité,» elle produit également l'«Ether-nue-litée» dans sons sens érotique et cosmique. Alors que l'univers est agi par un seul et même tropisme, «omniversel» produit fatalement «omni-vers-celle,» et ainsi de suite.[9]

Thus the reader is invited to read beyond the level of the word, to scrutinize its component atoms and see that they too have logic and sense. Meaning is present in abundance. Yet, if all this is made possible through points of resemblance between language and 'calligraphie,' why is it that 'calligraphie' is devoid of meaning? What is it that allows language to function as a means of communication while 'calligraphie' does not?

That something is missing is clear. Language is calligraphie combined with something else. Remove this vital element and all that is left is the non-functioning model found above in 'Spleen.' A parallel may be drawn here between language and man. In many traditions, the latter is held to be an amalgam of body and spirit. The body is the physical substance while the spirit animates it. When the spirit is separated from the body as in death, then the body ceases to function:

> Le long des marbriers (Encore un beau commerce!)
> Patauge aux défoncés un convoi, sous l'averse.
>
> Un trou, qu'asperge un prêtre âgé qui se morfond,
> Bâille à ce libéré de l'être; et voici qu'on
>
> Le déverse
> Au fond.
>
> 'Complainte de l'ange incurable' (Pia I, pp. 76-77)

The corpse is unable to move under its own power. Rather, it has movement imposed upon it. Furthermore, it is impelled into an area where the living cannot follow. Thus the mourners accompany the body to the graveside. The 'prêtre âgé' whose sounds are echoed by 'ce libéré de l'être' is a threshold figure but one who remains firmly on this side of the grave. The separation of the living and the dead is brought out by the rupture between 'on,' the anonymous source of the corpse's movement, and the 'Le,' the corpse itself.

In addition the break is over a stanza and the suddenly shortened lines, whose endings are clearly marked by rhyme, convey the impression of an object receding from view.

The description of the body as 'ce libéré de l'être' suggests that the living being is made up of two parts, one of which is the 'être' and the other of which is the remains thrown into the grave. The idea is a striking, and perhaps even perverse, inversion of the traditional notion of the spirit being liberated from the body. In this case the liberation is ironic since without its spiritual essence, its 'être,' the body ceases to function and becomes a mere simulacrum of a human being. A parallel may be drawn here with the split between signified and signifier which turns normal 'écriture' into 'calligraphie,' so that the latter may be said to be the cadaver of writing.

Language is like human beings, or for that matter the world – a collection of atoms, which in this case are letters, animated by some force which gives them meaning and purpose. The question then arises of whether or not the world is like a piece of writing and so capable of decipherment like any written text:

> Je songe à notre Terre, atome d'un moment,
> Dans l'Infini criblé d'étoiles éternelles,
> Au peu qu'ont déchiffré nos débiles prunelles,
> Au Tout qui nous est clos inexorablement.
>
> ('Triste, triste,' Pia I, p. 271)

Hence, we constantly see Laforgue questioning the stars, seeking the meaning and purpose of the universe. Yet the only reply is silence as in 'Sanglot perdu' which concludes:

> «Quelqu'un veille-t-il aux nuits solennelles?
> Qu'on parle! Est-ce oubli, hasard ou courroux?
> Pourquoi notre sort? C'est à rendre fous!» ...
> – Les étoiles d'or rêvaient éternelles ...
>
> (Pia I, p. 249)

The last line is a repetition of the first line of the poem but with a slightly different function – a pattern repeated elsewhere in these early poems. However, the meaning in context of each line, its referential as opposed to semantic meaning, is different. When the line first appears it suggests the possibility that the stars may be aroused to give a response whereas its second appearance indicates the unchanging indifference of the heavens to humanity.

It is important to distinguish here between what changes and what does

not. The stars do not change. They are in the same pattern as before and these patterns to not respond to the probing by humanity. The words and letters used are the same in the first line and in the last. Semantically there is no difference. What changes is the situation they describe. The reality to which an utterance refers, therefore, is detachable. It can be replaced by a different one. If it is not replaced, if the words do not refer, then they become truly dead, as uncommunicative as the letters Laforgue draws on the windowpane. On the other hand, meaning can only make itself manifest through the material of language – it cannot be apprehended otherwise. If it exists outside language, then it is cut off from our apprehension of it.

This is what lies at the heart of the story told in the 'Complainte du Roi de Thulé':

> «Soleil! Soleil! moi je descends
> Vers vos navrants palais polaires,
> Dorloter dans ce Saint-Suaire
> Votre cœur bien en sang,
> En le berçant!»
>
> Il dit, et, le Voile étendu,
> Tout éperdu,
> Vers les coraux et les naufrages,
> Le roi raillé des doux corsages,
> Beau comme un Mage
> Est descendu!
>
> (Pia I, pp. 105-106)

The king is a man obsessed by change and yet unable to come to terms with it. He is himself 'Immaculé,' insulated from sin and the corruption that it brings but deeply hurt by the nature of the changing world: '[il] Pleurait sur la métempsychose/Des lys en roses.' At last, he follows the dying sun as it withdraws from the world, beyond the coral reefs and shipwrecks.

The poem, however, does not follow the king all the way. It goes as far as the edge of the known world and then watches the king as he descends out of view. When the king returns, he is transformed:

> Braves amants! aux nuits de lait,
> Tournez vos clés!
> Une ombre d'amour pur transie,
> Viendrait vous gémir cette scie:
> «Il était un roi de Thulé
> Immaculé ...»

Not only has the masculine become feminine in the change from 'roi' to 'ombre,' but the physical has been changed into the spiritual. The king is a spirit of pure and absolute love. He contrasts with the particular and physical 'amants,' whose plural suggests a dependence on each other. Yet, how does this spirit make itself felt in the world? The answer is through language – but not perhaps as we normally understand it. The shade's language is described as a 'scie,' that is, language which exists in a pre-fixed form. In fact, as in 'Sanglot perdu,' the poem ends with a reprise of the opening. These words, which even on their initial appearance recall a popular song, Gounod's *Faust,* a poem by Goethe and a song by Schubert, are quoted as a bloc but, as in 'Sanglot perdu,' their significance is different from that of their first appearance. We are less tempted to look through them than at them. Their nature as artefact – or as part of an artefact – is more obvious. They are not about the king but are the king in so far as they are the only means by which we can apprehend him.

It is thus possible to say that for Laforgue, language is like matter. It is made of a limited number of letters just as matter is made of the atoms of the elements listed in the periodic table. Moreover, the combinations that we call words can themselves be combined into bigger groupings which are sentences or phrases just as substances such as clay can be made into bricks or iron into rods. It is possible furthermore to take phrases and sentences, bits of language, and use them to build other structures just as bricks make houses or rods are used to create a piece of machinery. Morover, just as it is possible to re-use bricks or rods in other structures of which they were not originally a part, so it is possible to use bits of language from other sources to make up a text. Sometimes as has been seen this will be simply reprises within poems. On other occasions there will be re-use of elements from one poem to another as in:

> Dans l'Infini criblé d'étoiles éternelles
>
> ('Triste, triste,' Pia I, p. 271)
>
> Dans l'Infini criblé d'éternelles splendeurs
>
> ('Médiocrité,' Pia I, p. 287)

Another clear example of this is the re-using of elements from *Les Fleurs de Bonne Volonté* in the composition of the *Derniers Vers*. Yet it is clear from the above example and from a study of the parallels between the two collections mentioned above that Laforgue is capable of varying existing elements when he uses them again.

Using old material in new ways enables Laforgue to exploit the cliché – something normally avoided in poetry. 'Autre complainte de lord Pierrot' demonstrates how the cliché may be successfully used:

> Celle qui doit me mettre au courant de la Femme!
> Nous lui dirons d'abord, de mon air le moins froid:
> «La somme des angles d'un triangle, chère âme,
> «Est égale à deux droits.»
>
> Et si ce cri lui part: «Dieu de Dieu! que je t'aime!»
> – «Dieu reconnaîtra les siens.» Ou piquée au vif:
> – «Mes claviers ont du cœur, tu seras mon seul thème.»
> Moi: «Tout est relatif.»
>
> (Pia I, p. 96)

The literal meaning of each item of speech is clear and poses no difficulties. Each in fact is a cliché, whose meaning in most contexts is accepted without reflection. A conversation built up of clichés is one where the speakers assemble ready-made elements so as to speed to a conclusion without having to stop for thought along the way. In fact, the way they are normally combined is also ruled by cliché so that when the expression 'que je t'aime' is met it is not hard to predict a likely response. No real meaning, nothing of any significance, is communicated. What happens in this poem is that the literal meanings of each of the elements do not fit into a coherent whole. This is because Pierrot's speech, although just as cliché-ridden as the woman's and therefore just as pointless, uses clichés inappropriate to the situation. There is no predictability. He is breaking the conventions, providing new combinations rather like those in 'violupté,' except that these are at the level of the sentence. In so doing, he forces the reader to look at the words and try to work out a way of proceeding from one utterance to the next. The cliché'd ways of relating one to another do not work and so new relationships are sought that will allow the various utterances to form a coherent dialogue. As was the case with the neologisms, this can bring out shades of meaning that were potentially there in the original but which habit had obscured. Thus when the penultimate line of the above quotation claims that the bond between the lovers is unique, the reply claims that everything is relative to everything else. Such a denial of exclusivity can be seen to be relevant to what has preceded it so that Pierrot's side of the dialogue is an oblique and ironic commentary on the woman's. Behind the literal meaning of the words lies hidden another meaning that can only be discovered by considering the

way the various utterances relate to each other. The context of an utterance, determined by its relationship to other utterances, thus determines its meaning, changing it into something new.

This element of change is very important. It is change that is the basis of all life – which is as Laforgue has put it above a 'perpétuelle échange de matière' or a 'métempsychose.' The dead body has lost its power to change just as the king has lost his power to say anything new in words new-minted for the occasion. Yet that limitation does not apply to Laforgue when writing his poetry. Unlike the occasion when he writes on the window, Laforgue is dealing with a language that is capable of change and where change is significant.[10] Altering a meaningless letter in a meaningless sequence makes no difference – and difference is what lies at the heart of meaning. Thus the words of the king repeated unchangingly by him, have, as we have seen, a different meaning for the reader on each appearance because the latter takes into account the context as well as semantics.

Once again we are confronted with the phenomenon whereby meaning is not indissolubly linked to a particular form of words or a particular form of words tied down to just one meaning even though meaning cannot make itself manifest except through these words. Language is a medium for meaning. Without language there would be no meaning and without meaning there would be no language. However, the link between the two is subject to flux. As we have seen, meaning may change even though the language may be the same but, by the same token, language itself may be subject to alteration. It no less than human beings is subject to the rearrangement of living matter described in 'Triste, triste':

> Puis nous allons fleurir les beaux pissenlits d'or.

This is what distinguishes living matter from what is inert: the possibility of absorbing other matter into the organism and making it part of itself.

Transformation is a part of both life and language. Laforgue's starting point for this process is below the level of the word. His building blocks are smaller and this is what allows him to create neologisms such as 'volupté' or 'éternullité.' Furthermore, the reader understands what is being said – he grasps the compositional principles that lie behind such new words. This is because he accepts that words are made up of sub-units which are combined in a meaningful way.

However, if change is an essential part of life, then the question of its

being a source of anguish must be tackled. As was seen in the 'Complainte du Roi de Thulé,' it was 'métempsychose' that caused his weeping. The purity of the lily was being changed into the rose with its intimations of passion, blood and mortality. Change is presented as a change for the worse. This is true elsewhere in Laforgue's poetry as, for example, 'Locutions des Pierrots xiv':

> Retroussant d'un air de défi
> Mes manches de mandarin pâle,
> J'arrondis ma bouche et – j'exhale
> Des conseils doux de Crucifix.
>
> (Pia II, p. 44)

Christ is reborn as Pierrot. His miracles and teachings become a magician's tricks and patter. The world is gradually winding down and what exists now is a lesser version of what happened in the past. The grandeur of Christ finds its modern counterpart in Pierrot. Yet, even in the very heart of Pierrot's ridiculousness, there is still preserved some of the grandeur that was Christ's. The comparison is double-edged. It presents Pierrot as a figure of both tragedy and farce.

Thus change is diminution but it is not total loss. Something of value is preserved as life is recycled, as can be seen in the following example from the 'Complainte de l'ange incurable' (Pia I, pp. 76-77):

> Où vont les gants d'avril et les rames d'antan?

which echoes Villon's refrain:

> Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

The re-use of Villon is more than just decorative. It is more than a learned allusion that allows Laforgue to show off the extent of his reading. Instead it is there to express meaning. Villon's language is dislocated in the 'tournoiement chaotique' that is Laforgue's poetic practice so that it expresses Laforgue's meaning rather than Villon's. Laforgue is not quoting Villon but rather using words similar to his but with a meaning that is the former's alone. Thus the imagery is changed to fit the poem's evocation of a lakeside in Spring while at the same time 'rames' which belongs to the literary register underscores the point made by the reference to Villon – that this is a linguistic artefact. Change is vital to meaning and it is the difference between Laforgue and Villon rather than literal quotation that is of interest to the reader. Thus

the change from Villon's 'sont' to Laforgue's 'vont' is atomistic, a mere letter's difference, but that one change alters the meaning considerably. The semantic gap between the two words is indicative of the different perceptions each poet is conveying. Villon is lamenting irrevocable loss. It is a state which is incapable of change. Laforgue, on the other hand, is lamenting the process of loss. Unlike Villon's snows, Laforgue's gloves are still here even though they are under threat. The latter is thus aware of losing something but is equally conscious that something is still left.

A parallel may be drawn here with the situations of the mourners and the corpse later in the poem. The corpse cannot move of its own volition and so is dead. The mourners on the other hand may be moving towards the grave, an intimation of their own mortality, but as long as they are moving they are still alive. The paradox is that life is a process of movement towards death. Once we stop moving towards death, we die.[11] Change may be a sign of decay but it is also a sign of vitality. Villon's words are changed and in the process become less noble. However, Laforgue's version of them gives them a new meaning: he revitalizes them. This is the 'du nouveau' denied the writer of 'calligraphie' in 'Spleen.' It is found not in objects – whether they be things or words – but rather in the meanings they convey to us.

Consequently, intertextuality, the use of other authors' texts, is of a piece with what we have seen of Laforgue's thought. The world is made up of atoms and in a similar fashion language is made up of letters. Whatever is in the world is constructed by nature or man just as a text is constructed by its author. The laws of science mean that nothing is truly destroyed, nothing truly created – matter is endlessly recycled albeit in new forms. This applies to man as well as to what he creates. He has a repertoire of letters with which he can compose. He also has a stock of letters already assembled into words. In addition, there is at his disposal a set of pre-fabricated texts from other authors or even his own works. Laforgue's achievement is to realize that all this is part of a continuum, a single process. He understands how language is built up into a poetic text and exploits that knowledge to create 'du nouveau' – strange forms and structures that nevertheless signify. He changes and adapts the raw material that is in front of him. He dismantles language so as to build anew, using only the elements that he needs and discarding the rest. It is the same poetic process that produces both 'violupté' and:

> Où vont les gants d'avril, et les rames d'antan?

Hiddleston, however, takes a more negative view of Laforgue's intertextuality:

> Grâce à l'envoûtement de ces multiples échos on croit d'abord éprouver la même ouverture de notre mémoire et de notre espace culturels que dans «Les Phares», mais on a vite fait de se rendre compte que l'effet en est beaucoup plus nuancé et ambigu. Le procédé qu'emploie Laforgue est en fin de compte assez analogue à l'ironie de la répétition, mais là encore il s'agit d'une ironie qui démolit non seulement les textes auxquels elle renvoie, mais qui est elle aussi démolie du même coup. Le texte laforguien semble en effet se défaire sous nos yeux pour se déclarer tout aussi gratuit et éphémère que les intertextes dont il s'est nourri.[12]

For him Laforgue's poetry shows a tendency to self-destruct and at times is reduced to 'un simple exercise de style, ou pis encore à un jeu de mots.'[13] Indeed, he speaks of Laforgue's poetry in terms which betoken failure:

> Ce qui manque à la parole laforguienne c'est la capacité d'établir des vérités stables et permanentes, ou d'affirmer quoi que ce soit, et d'organiser le disparate des énoncés en un ensemble cohérent de significations.[14]

Yet just a few lines later Hiddleston makes the claim (quoted above) about the value of Laforgue's work:

> Le miracle, c'est que Laforgue ait réussi à faire de tant de fragments éphémères et du disparate de son expérience un univers unique, entièrement «sui generis», et qui compte parmi les plus émouvants et peut-être parmi les plus durables du dix-neuvième siècle.[15]

While not explaining how this comes about – it is a 'miracle' – the above does seem to point to some constructive process or other within Laforgue's poetry. The verb 'faire' echoes and reverses the earlier use of 'se défaire' and 'univers' implies some sort of coherence or fitting together of parts into a whole. Consequently, though Hiddleston lays great stress on the negative aspects of Laforgue's poetic practice, there is also a recognition that his poetry is itself a positive achievement. What Laforgue has done is create a fictional universe out of fragments of text, just as the King of Thule's veil is woven from threads. It is important to make this point in view of Hiddleston's earlier remark about Laforgue's poetry being at times reduced to the level of word play. What Laforgue is working with is language and ultimately that is what his poems are – verbal creations.

However, these exist in time and are affected by it. Hiddleston's phrase 'tournoiement chaotique' shows not just spatial movement but also implies movement in time (for without time there cannot be movement) and that

this movement is no more than going round in meaningless circles. Yet, time is also essential to life and creativity. Without movement in time, there is only death. The corpse in the 'Complainte de l'ange incurable' is displaced in space but as a corpse he is no longer free to move in the dimension of time. Similarly, the unchanging calligraphy on the window conveys no meaning either to Laforgue or the reader – unlike the shifting, protean language forms found elsewhere in the poems. The true enemy of the meaningful is stability, lack of movement or change.

Movement may lead to the break down of order and passing time erode language as 'L'Hiver qui vient' makes clear:

> C'est la saison, c'est la saison, la rouille envahit les masses,
> La rouille ronge en leurs spleens kilométriques
> Les fils télégraphiques des grandes routes où nul ne passe.
> (Pia II, pp. 181-184)

Yet this is not such a clear case as may at first appear. Rust does indeed do its work over time but it is particularly associated with disuse – as though an object in constant movement is kept clean of rust. This suggestion is reinforced by the reference to the unused roads along which no-one travels. The lack of movement contributes to their air of decay.

Later in the poem there is further evidence for the ambiguous nature of time:

> Non, non! C'est la saison et la planète falote!
> Que l'autan, que l'autan
> Effiloche les savates que le Temps se tricote!
> C'est la saison, oh déchirements! c'est la saison!
> Tous les ans, tous les ans,
> J'essaierai en chœur d'en donner la note.

In the midst of this unravelling and tearing of the fabric of the world – a process which is cyclic and thus involves time – we find that time itself is fighting a battle against decay. It creates while the wind destroys. However, what it makes is already old ('savates') but this is to be expected in a universe where matter is endlessly recycled. Nothing can be new but rather everything is posterior to and hence older than that which preceded it. The verbs in the third line are also significant. They are positioned at either end of the verse and there is an aural echo of the vowels 'i' and 'o' and a visual echo that is

even more extended – 'e,' 'i,' 'o' and 'e.' They are like two evenly matched fighters squaring up to each other. Furthermore, both verbs are in the present tense so that this is a continuous state of affairs – neither gets the upper hand. Compare the difference were 'se tricote' to be put into the perfect tense. In that case it would precede and be vanquished by 'Effiloche.' Here, however, the 'Effiloche' precedes 'se tricote' thus setting up in the reader's mind the possibility that first the old slippers are unravelled and then they are knitted again using the same thread. Consequently dismantling is a prerequisite of construction.

Not only that, but the re-use of the thread is a form of conservation. It is not completely destroyed but is given a new form. This also applies to the bits and pieces of language that Laforgue uses. At its most basic and indeed obvious level, the use of language prevents it rusting. Language forms die through lack of use. The same applies, however, to larger language units – the intertexts. As we have seen, Hiddleston claims that Laforgue's use of other texts is 'une ironie qui démolit non seulement les textes auxquels elle renvoie, mais qui est elle aussi démolie du même coup.' If we look at the example from Villon quoted above in the light of the relationship between 'Effiloche' and 'se tricote,' we will see that Hiddleston is only half right. The Villon original is fragmented but it is also re-used. It is brought into a nineteenth-century poem. This is not so much a 'renvoi' as a 'rappel.' Villon is preserved by the allusion – he is not destroyed by it. His relevance for Laforgue is proclaimed. In a similar way, Pierrot restores the memory of Christ albeit in different form from what we normally expect. Whatever we may think of this, there can be no denying that, for Laforgue, Christ is a part of Pierrot and so is preserved through him. The alternative is oblivion. Laforgue, like the King of Thule, weaves his text and preserves the past.

To let things stand is to let them rot, fall into oblivion and meaninglessness. This is the fate of the corpse in the grave while the calligraphy on the window has never had any place in the significant order of things. It is quite unlike the written language whose physical form it shares. As Eric Havelock points out, the primary function of writing is to preserve:

> The function of the original model [i.e. writing as developed by the Greeks] was not to replace a prior knowledge of spoken speech but to trigger a recall of that knowledge. Its effective use depended upon the requirement that the oral vocabulary of the reader first be fluent and educated. The alphabet was and is an instrument of acoustic recognition, and only that.[16]

J. Hillis Miller would agree:

> What rationale for the study of the humanities should be put in place of the old consensus? I think there can be only one answer. Preservation, conversation (*sic*), the keeping of the archives, the whole work of memory remembering, and memorialization: yes, this remains an indispensable task of humanistic study. But our past is remembered differently now and some different things are now recalled into memory, for example, black literature or the history of women and writing by women. Memory and the storing and interpretation of what is remembered is not a passive but a vital and passionate act, an act each generation does anew and differently as it appropriates history for its own purposes.[17]

This is what Laforgue does. He stores experience in the patterns of his texts – but it is an active not a passive process. He reinterprets and updates. The past is not a mummified past but one that is incorporated into the present. Change, both in its positive and negative aspects, is embraced and incorporated into the preservation of our past and present. The 'tournoiement' of the poetry is not ultimately 'chaotique.' The language is not a babbling or gratuitous word-play. If we are baffled it is because our fixed ideas are being broken down so that something new and memorable can be built up from the fragments. It is this that makes for what Hiddleston recognizes as the durability of Laforgue's writing. Yet this is a durability that incorporates the flexible, the protean. It is in constant movement so that it may always move us.

NOTES

1. James Hiddleston, 'Espaces et temps laforguiens,' in: *Laforgue aujourd'hui*, James Hiddleston (Ed.), (Paris, 1988), pp. 51-65 (p. 65).
2. Hiddleston, p. 65.
3. Jules Laforgue, 'Noël Résigné' in: *Poésies Complètes*, 2 vols, Pascal Pia (Ed.), 2nd edition (Paris, 1979) p. 276. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
4. Significantly, no examples of the 'calligraphie' occur in the poem. The latter is marginalized, excluded from it. Not being true language, it cannot properly exist in something made of language.
5. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologising of the Word*, New Accents (London and New York, 1982), p. 91.
6. Eric Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton, 1982), p. 81.
7. Daniel Grojnowski, *Jules Laforgue et l'«Originalité»*, Langages (Neuchâtel, 1988), p. 101.

8. Grojnowski, p. 123.
9. Grojnowski, p. 102.
10. It is in this sense that words on the page exemplify the 'tournoiement' that Hiddleston ascribes to them.
11. Thus the last line of the last of the *Derniers Vers* ('Puisque, tôt ou tard, nous mourrons ...' (Pia II, p. 217)) is at once an acceptance of death's power over us while at the same time its future tense proclaims the equal inevitability of living.
12. Hiddleston, p. 64.
13. Hiddleston, p. 64.
14. Hiddleston, p. 65.
15. Hiddleston, p. 65.
16. Havelock, p. 318.
17. J. Hillis Miller, 'The Function of Literary Theory at the Present Time,' in: *The Future of Literary Theory*. Ralph Cohen (Ed.) (New York and London, 1989) pp. 102-111 (p. 110).

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